

Is Faith a Path to Knowledge?

An Invited Position Paper By

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In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:

“Can or should faith (specifically, religious faith) be considered an epistemology? If yes, what makes faith an epistemological method? If no, what epistemological methods preclude faith from being considered?”

Abstract: *In this paper, I consider whether (religious) faith has any role to play in conferring positive epistemic status to (especially religious) beliefs. I outline several conceptions of faith that have been historically important within Western religious traditions. I then consider what role faith might be supposed to play, so understood, within the framework of internalist and externalist accounts of knowledge. My general conclusion is that, insofar as faith itself is a justified epistemic attitude, it requires justification and acquires that justification only through the regular faculties for contingent truths: sense perception and reason. I also argue, however, that the operations of our cognitive faculties in arriving at epistemic judgments on matters of substance are sufficiently complex, subtle, and often temporally prolonged, to make it exceptionally difficult to reconstruct the cognitive process and to judge whether it meets standards of rationality.*

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What is Faith, Anyway? Two Views

LET ME BEGIN BY clarifying—and further specifying—the question here as I understand it. First, even if faith is an epistemology—or, better, an epistemological method—it is presumably beyond dispute that faith is not *only* such a method. It has other roles, and purposes to serve, in the lives of religious persons. But what is meant by the claim that faith is, or provides, an epistemological method? Epistemology is the discipline that asks questions about what it is to know, or have justified belief, or evidence for, something.

Further, it asks how, if at all, we can come by such things, and whether we have in fact done so with respect to various matters of interest to us. To ask, then, whether faith is, or provides, an epistemological method is, I shall take it, to ask whether it offers a distinctive path to knowledge, or provides a means for justifying beliefs, or puts us somehow in touch with evidence for or against certain sorts of propositions.

Two further questions promptly arise: 1) What *sorts* of propositions might the exercise of faith claim to put us into a cognitive relation with? 2) What is it, indeed, to have faith? As to the first question, it is (presumably) not just *any* sort of proposition for which faith can deliver evidence or justified belief or knowledge. What, therefore, is the target range of propositions? And, with respect to these, is the exercise of faith distinctive in that it provides a kind or degree of evidence that is not to obtainable solely by way of the exercise of other cognitive operations—for example, sense perception, introspection, memory, deductive and inductive reasoning, and so forth? If it does so, how and why is it able to deliver this special knowledge? How does it aid and abet the operation of other cognitive faculties?

As to the second question, we begin by observing that, even if we confine ourselves to the main religious traditions of the West, we are confronted by a considerable variety of conceptions of what it is to have “faith.” The medieval Christian theologians, for example, regularly understood faith that *p* as a matter of accepting the truth of *p* on someone else’s say-so—in particular, on the say-so of God. Faith, for them, consisted in accepting divine revelation, perhaps received through the instrumentality of God’s prophets, because it comes from God. Modern Christian conceptions of faith are commonly quite different, in significant measure (at least among Protestants) because of the influence of Søren Kierkegaard.¹

Kierkegaard’s view of faith was certainly complex, but at its heart, famously, is the claim that faith is an inner attitude, involving confidence and a kind of commitment that is exercised in tension with whatever negative evidence one has for proposition *p* through “regular channels” (that is, sense experience, reasoning, and so on). In short, to perform an act of faith in *p* is a challenge, one whose exercise is afforded opportunity precisely in inverse

¹ John Locke accepted but further articulated the medieval conception of faith in John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (1975; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), book IV, chap. XVIII (Originally published in 1689). For an accessible work on Kierkegaard’s reflections on faith, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death*, rev. ed., trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

proportion to the strength of the “regular” evidence *against* p . The stronger the negative evidence, the stronger the faith needed to meet the challenge of believing p with certainty despite the negative evidence. The Knight of Faith is one who believes even the impossible, when it is a matter of faith.

But another central feature of Kierkegaard’s conception of faith is captured by his dictum that “truth is subjectivity.” What did Kierkegaard mean by this? He does not deny that there are objective truths in the world about which it is right and reasonable to believe. Indeed, he insists that the Knight of Faith does not reject, deny, or let go of such truths; to do so would be to lose one’s grip on reality and join the ranks of the mad. Nevertheless, there are truths that the heart knows that elude the grip of our other cognitive faculties. These truths are “subjective.” They are discerned by an inward eye, often have profound (even existential) import, and are not merely held with deep conviction but treasured as residing at the very center of one’s understanding of self and of the world. Of course, many of these truths do seem to be not only about one’s inner affections, sense of purpose, hopes, and other such findings of introspection, meditation, and the like: many seem, on their face, to make claims about the world and claims upon our ways of acting. To maintain such commitments in the face of a recognition that they cannot be (objectively) true is to confront a paradox—and, indeed, Kierkegaard insisted repeatedly not only that he has not achieved this mark of faith but that he does not understand how the Knight of Faith is able to achieve it. On Kierkegaard’s view of faith, it is safe to say that very few ever achieve it.

Nevertheless, one might ask whether such inward convictions or insights capture important truths—truths perhaps not accessible in any other way. If so, we might judge that the inner lives of those who discover them, comprehend them, and hold fast to them would constitute a unique route to a kind of special knowledge—that the way of faith, as Kierkegaard portrayed it, does indeed qualify as an epistemological method, a way of knowing. Moreover, it is plain, and was of course the context in which Kierkegaard himself launched his reflections, that the way of faith is often a religious path, and it is religious life and experience that provide the setting for the pursuit of those truths that comprise “subjectivity.”²

² It is, however, considerably less obvious whether, as Kierkegaard seems to have thought, Christian faith provides a uniquely trenchant and revealing path to such truths.

The Scope of Faith-Based Knowledge

We have here, then, two different conceptions of faith and two different accounts of how the way of faith might provide knowledge of or evidence for certain truths. What sorts of truths would those be? Well, if having faith is a matter of believing a proposition on God's say-so, then (presumably) any proposition might qualify so long as God sees fit to announce it. Such truths could, in principle, be ones that fall within the natural capacities of human beings to discover on their own. Indeed, Aquinas provided reasons God would have for conveying some such truths to humankind; for example, because the great mass of humanity lack either the education, or the skill, or the means to investigate and discover such truths—truths that are of significance for our well-being. (Thus, there may be “do not try this at home” sorts of truths that convey valuable information and that, if we are left to investigate on our own, leave us the wiser only too late and perhaps too briefly.) So, there are few sorts of propositions such that we might not learn them, or be able to learn them, by hearing them from God. But, on the other side, there are surely propositions whose truth we would not be able to learn, absent something like a divine leg-up; for example, unprovable theorems of mathematics or, perhaps, knowledge of how human beings with brains are capable of conscious thought and experience. Aquinas certainly thought there were such truths and that some of them are necessary for us to know for our salvation, such as the “mysteries” of the Church revolving around the doctrine of the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Let us reflect a bit further on how this route to knowledge is supposed to work. But before we can do so, I must say a bit about the contested notions of knowledge, justification, and evidence. There is no question that these terms are used variously and loosely in common parlance. But it does not take much reflection to elicit the intuition that having knowledge that *p*, in a narrow sense, requires nothing less than having grounds that guarantee the truth of *p*. Such grounds are evidence (some truths are self-evident; their content itself guarantees their truth). Evidence comes in degrees of strength and, hence, reasonable belief comes in degrees of assurance. Religious beliefs often enjoy a high degree of confidence; paradoxically, many of these receive scant support from the usual sources of empirical evidence. So, evidently, faith has the mandate of filling the gap between our regular sources of evidence—sense and reason—and the level of evidence required for rational certainty or near-certainty. But does faith itself provide *evidence*, or is it just another word for believing claims despite their want of evidence? Such a conception of faith

would amount to a badly cheapened distortion of Kierkegaard's view, but it appears that something like this notion is characteristic of a widespread lay understanding of faith among modern-day Christians.³

If faith justifies a belief in some way that eludes or supplements "regular channels" of evidence gathering and evaluation, how does it do so? Initially, there are two suggestions that deserve consideration. First, there is an answer to this question that naturally emerges from the medieval view of faith mentioned above. Second, there is a consideration, mentioned by William James in defense of his "pragmatic" argument for faith (a kind of adumbration of Pascal's famous Wager), that turns on the thought that evidence for a proposition might emerge only after, and because of, an act of faith. Let me turn now to these.

What I am calling the (or a) "medieval view" understands faith as a matter of taking God's word for the things he tells us, even if the truth of the revelation cannot independently be established by human minds alone. The most durable difficulty for this view is one with an ancient pedigree. Following a tradition that harks back at least as far as the composition of the books of the Hebrew Bible, the medieval theologians understood that claims of prophetic insight could quite easily be fraudulent or the result of self-deception. God's word is trustworthy: but with what assurance can we repose confidence in the candor and credentials of the prophet supposedly communicating God's word? The answer was to have God certify the authenticity of divine revelation by accompanying or associating them with miracles—that is, literally, signs—in the form of visible deeds that only God could himself, or through his empowered agents, perform.⁴

³ As is often correctly pointed out, faith has also a practical dimension: it reflects a kind of commitment to the use of a belief as an action-guiding principle, even when there is a risk that it is not true. There are, of course, circumstances in which it is entirely rational to act on the chance that some proposition is true, even when the evidence makes that unlikely. But here, I am concerned with the epistemic issues, not the purely pragmatic ones.

⁴ Early Bible stories that reflect this line of thought include Moses' power-contest with Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7–8), Gideon's demand for proof from God (Judges 6:36–40), and Elijah's power-contest with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18). John Locke inherited the apologetic strategy, with some elaboration, which no doubt helped to provoke Hume's famous attack in Book X of David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

The Need for Reason to Justify Faith

Miracles as Divine Signs

Now, setting aside for the moment the question whether such a defense of favored prophetic traditions can succeed, we may note that this strategy relies after all upon an appeal to an authentication of the content of revelation by appeal to regular empirical investigation. Specifically, it presupposes the possibility of identifying genuine miracles through the employment of the senses and reason. What is a miracle? Accounts vary. By the lights of some, a miracle is an event whose occurrence involves the suspension of the laws of nature. Such accounts, however, have the burden of making sense of what a law of nature is and of how God is able to “suspend” such things. More clearly articulable is the view that in doing a miracle, God does not suspend the laws but provides, as a supernatural agent, some additional “oomph” that steers events in a direction they would not have taken in the absence of that supernatural force or influence. Either way, the underlying idea is that only God could exert that kind of control over nature. Thus, when such things happen, the only explanation that can be given involves invoking divine agency.⁵

Now in the first place, as Hume notes, such conceptions of miracles require that, in order to identify them properly, we know in full relevant detail the circumstances in which a problematic event occurs—in other words, all the potentially causative forces that are present—and that, further, we have discovered all the natural laws that govern the conjoint action of these natural forces. Only thus do we establish what *would* have happened, were only natural processes in play. But all this can be established only by a thorough fact-finding investigation, making use of empirical data and rules of inductive and deductive inference—through regular cognitive processes.

Now this stricture is not as daunting as it seems. It is true that strict satisfaction of these parameters is a tall order—perhaps one that is almost never fully satisfied given the underdetermination of theory by data. But that does not force us to abandon all hope of identifying likely miracles. In fact, the common observation that folks who are not scientifically sophisticated would be in no position ever to judge whether an event is miraculous or not strikes me as clearly false. One does not need to be familiar with Archimedes’ Principle to recognize that walking on liquid water without props is not

⁵ Cf. David Kyle Johnson, “Justified Belief in Miracles is Impossible,” *Science, Religion and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2015): 61–74, <http://doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2015/2.2.61.74>.

something a human being can do. Indeed, the need to manufacture stories that provide such props for Jesus' feat on the Sea of Galilee and other wonder-works has been something of a cottage industry in certain quarters of the apologetic literature. But such stories—for instance, that Jesus floated, into the face of a heavy head-wind, for some three miles across the sea, in the dark, to a small boat, on a raft constructed by the disciples, or upon a chance submerged ice-floe—are plainly Hail Marys that serve only to highlight the difficulty of finding plausible naturalistic explanations.

The Epistemic Status of Human Testimony

Nonetheless, further difficulties await the project of certifying revelation by appeal to miracles. First (and central to Hume's attack on that project) is the observation that, if the veracity of prophets who claim divine revelation requires some independent confirmation, then so does the veracity of those who report the alleged occurrence of a miracle to others. And *that* requires judgements of the candor and competence of other human beings—those who transmit such stories—that can only appeal to regular empirical considerations.⁶ So, prophecy that has occurred out-of-sight labors under the same sort of empirical requirement for independent confirmation, one that is regularly, perhaps always, impossible to satisfy to a degree that is sufficient to overwhelm reasonable doubt as to the occurrence of the reported miracle.

That is not the only challenge. The miracle-monger is on the hook for showing that the “miraculous” events in question could *only* have occurred through divine action—in particular, the action of the divinity in whom faith is being commended. Not only must camouflaged natural influences be ruled out, but also camouflaged *supernatural* interference with the regular workings of the world. In short: who is to say that the Deceiver is not capable of effecting miracles, the better to seduce us with? But if he is, how is one to distinguish divine revelations from demonic ones? Clearly, appeal to some putative source of divine advice (such as the Bible) on that question would be circular as a response to this difficulty.⁷

⁶ See esp., Darren M. Slade, “Properly Investigating Miracle Claims,” in *The Case Against Miracles*, ed. John W. Loftus (United Kingdom: Hypatia Press, 2019), 114–47.

⁷ Medieval and Reformation-era mystics and theologians were indeed concerned to discern between delusions arising from mental illness and demonic possession on the one hand, and genuine communications from God on the other. But, at least as far as I am aware, all their criteria were either question-begging or not shown to be features that the Devil himself could not counterfeit.

So far, it does not appear that the medieval conception of faith has much to offer by way of information that does not eventually require independent support from ordinary empirical investigations. Only such inquiries could (at best) provide some assurance that experiences through which God is alleged to convey some truths are not the work of demons, or the baneful effects of schizophrenia or epilepsy, an overheated imagination, or simply attention-getting fabrications. Still, it can be—and has been—argued that accepting the testimony of others is in general (and by extension in the present sort of case, where the word of a prophet is under scrutiny) an independent primary or basic source of knowledge, one whose epistemic bona fides are not reducible to what we glean from direct sense perception or personal investigation. It is tempting to think that, in the absence of overriding reasons for doubt, someone's say-so itself provides strong evidence, or even justification that brings knowledge, of the alleged facts.⁸

Philosophers who accept this view of testimony—anti-reductionists with respect to the epistemic credentials of hear-say—emphasize the vast number of propositions we accept as true only on the basis of others' affirmations. To learn the height of Mt. Everest, I trust my atlas. To discover your birthday, I just ask you, and so on. Reductionists, on the other hand, insist that it is only by way of empirical evidence that we can learn to trust (and when to distrust) the say-so of another. We learn by experience what sort of person is likely competent to provide information on a given matter, and what sort of personal character justifies assurance of honesty.

It seems to me the reductionists are essentially right but with a twist. The twist introduces an *a priori* element in the reasons we have to trust others. The twist arises from the minimum conditions that are necessary for communication via human language—conditions that are knowable *a priori*. If a public language is to consist of a systematic, conventionalized means of constructing signs that communicate propositional content, then participants in the process must have the abilities needed to learn and follow certain practices. They must, in short, be able to learn from nearby fluent users of the language a vocabulary and a grammar, and this requires that: 1) participants correctly presume themselves and their interlocutors to be each *en rapport* with some common, recognizable features of their shared environment; 2) that fluent speakers who make claims about that environment regularly attempt, and succeed in, saying what is true; and 3) that, given the systematic correlations between speech-signals and environmental features, neophytes are

⁸ A well-known defense of this position appears in C. A. J. Cody, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), doi.org/10.1093/0198235518.001.0001.

capable of using memory, deduction, and inductive reasoning to infer that certain signs stand for certain features of the world.

What is knowable *a priori*, then, is that *if* a community of creatures shares a common language, then they must have and regularly use the mentioned capacities, and do so in an environment that is conducive to their exercise.⁹ These include, notably, truth-knowing and truth-telling. So, there is a *presumption* that language-users are (a) good reasoners and (b) habitual truth-tellers. Of course, the presumption is defeasible; and in certain circumstances, we do well to abandon it and adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion. But what those circumstances are, and when they do or do not obtain, is something that can be gleaned only from experience, though Darren Slade argues that there are at least five elements needed before granting someone a presumption of truth-telling.¹⁰ Thus, testimony is not a stand-alone source of knowledge; and indeed, it is an empirical question in the first place whether observed behaviors within a group constitute a system of information exchange and not a matter for *a priori* judgment.

To be sure, if there is a God, and if God essays to communicate with (certain) human beings, then, since he is by stipulation no liar, it will follow that we can trust his assurances (ignoring, of course, indications to the contrary; cf. Ezek. 14:9; 2 Thess. 2:11).¹¹ But it remains a question whether there is indeed such a being, and whether he is on the other end of the line upon specified occasions—and only empirical evidence can establish that. If so, then merely *believing* that God has vouchsafed some proposition *p* cannot be a stand-alone reason for the acceptance of *p*. The medieval conception of faith I have been examining, thus, does not appear to contribute anything to our means for increasing our store of knowledge. All the lifting is done by inferences from experience: if we have thereby already established that there *is* a God, and that he *is* truthfully communicating something to us or to a

⁹ The reasons parallel those, noted by Immanuel Kant, that the practice of promising can only maintain its intended purpose if promise-makers, for the most part, both intend to and do fulfill their promises rather than offering promises in a way that is only randomly associated with promise fulfillment.

¹⁰ These elements are: 1) the mental capacity to tell the truth; 2) an explicit indication that the truth is being spoken; 3) a willingness to provide corroborative information; 4) the lack of a strong motivation to deceive others; and 5) the lack of a propensity for deceiving others about the subject in question (see Slade, “Properly Investigating Miracle Claims,” 141).

¹¹ See J. J. M. Roberts, “Does God Lie? Divine Deceit as a Theological Problem in Israelite Prophetic Literature,” in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 123–31 and Ronald A. Veenker, “Do Deities Deceive?,” in *Windows to the Ancient World of the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of Samuel Greengus*, ed. Bill T. Arnold, Nancy L. Erickson, and John H. Walton (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 201–13.

competent and honest witness, then *of course* we should believe it. That would be the rational thing.

William James: Son of Pascal's Wager

Let us turn, therefore, to a point made by William James as part of his pragmatic defense for acts of faith, which is related to the preceding discussion.¹² James suggests that it is perfectly reasonable to adopt a stance of faith *before* one has acquired empirical evidence sufficient to tip the scales in favor of the proposition that a trustworthy God exists. James relies upon an analogy: typically, when we newly meet someone, we are safe in assuming that the stranger will not forthwith reveal to one their innermost thoughts and feelings. It is only once one has established a firm and close friendship that such things about the former stranger are revealed. But establishing such a trusting friendship usually involves offering gestures of goodwill and trust *before* one has learned much about the recipient. When such overtures are made, then our prospective friend will be open to reciprocating in kind. In short, it may be on us to “break the ice” with acts that convince others that we are trustworthy and kind-hearted. And so, James reasons, God may well require of us that we initiate friendship by displaying an accepting and welcoming frame of mind: in short, by extending to God acts of faith. And *then* God, if he so wills, may welcome us too by revealing his presence and love in ways that confer upon us empirical access to both his existence and his gracious providence. Faith, on James’ account, may serve as a key that opens the gate to new vistas of knowledge, acquired through the exercise of our ordinary faculties but conditioned upon our having certain attitudes toward God—and, for the same reason, foreclosed to those who demand proof first—and only then will we enter into a personal and revealing relationship with God.

On James’s account, faith, understood at least partly as a desire for friendship with God, does, then, play an epistemic role in the search for certain types of knowledge that come with friendship. Several objections now need examination. The most obvious is that there is an important disanalogy between the case of seeking friendship with another human being and that of engaging with God. In the human case, ordinarily, one is not in doubt as to the very existence of the prospective friend. Indeed, one does not seek friendship with *just anybody*; besides having the credential of existence, real

¹² See William James, *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897; repr., New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1907) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; repr., New York: Mentor Books, 1958).

friendship is almost always sought with persons about whom one does know a thing or two—enough to judge that there is a reasonable chance that a friendship is possible and likely to be rewarding to both oneself and the friend. But James is asking us to extend overtures of friendship to a person we do not know to exist and, *a fortiori*, have no direct personal knowledge of at all. Of course, James is arguing that the risk here is still worth taking—on the chance that God does exist and is the kind of being who will reciprocate our efforts to befriend him. After all, what have we to lose?

What we have to lose depends upon how severely God might want to test us before shedding his grace upon us—and there have been reports of his willingness to impose severe tests indeed.¹³ How much can we really presume to know about the workings of a divine mind? Where our aim is human friendship, we come, as we mature, to know a good deal about human psychology, even if many of the particulars respecting a newcomer might be as yet unknown. It is not evident, therefore, whether a Jamesian “wager” is a well-advised course of action respecting God.

Second, it does not seem that faith, on James’ conception of it, does any *epistemic* work for us. Rather, it appears to function as a means—a causal condition—for placing our cognitive faculties in a favorable position to acquire certain sorts of data. Wearing eyeglasses—if your vision is poor—is another such means; but the eyeglasses themselves are not part of our cognitive process. Having a good microscope may be a *sine qua non* for visually inspecting the interior anatomy of bacteria; and, of course, building a microscope itself demands knowledge. But the instrument itself is not part of the cognitive process of doing pathogen anatomy. It is, rather, a cause of our being in a position to gather the cognitively relevant inputs. Analogously, that is the role that faith plays in James’ defense of engaging with it.¹⁴

¹³ Upon, e.g., Abraham, Moses, and Job, *inter alia*. These cases are not strictly analogous, but what are the odds that God might find us ripe for a trial or two before being open to friendship? Perhaps it will have been worth it—if God then relents; but what if God does not relent (perhaps we fail the test), or what if we have willingly endured real suffering but God in fact does not exist?

¹⁴ Paul Moser defends a view that bears some resemblance to James’s, but Moser adds the strong claim that genuine faith will (sooner or later) prompt a response in which God establishes such a close personal bond with the person of faith as to override any possible grounds for skepticism (see Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008], <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511499012>). For a criticism of that position, see Evan Fales, “Journeying in Perplexity,” in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief*, ed. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 89–106, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139939621.006>.

Faith, then, *might* serve as an epistemic aide, even though not itself a method of epistemic improvement. But this, while granting faith a possible positive contribution to the quest for knowledge, has also a downside. That brings me to a third danger that attends the mustering of faith in the service of knowledge, and it presents perhaps the most serious threat to a positive evaluation of faith as a kind of epistemic virtue. The difficulty is that faith is quite likely to produce in the believer a kind of blindness closely akin to confirmation bias. The acquisition of deep religious doxastic commitments, which is itself often not prompted by rational reflection on evidence but by a kind of enthusiasm (Locke's phrase), is indeed often attended with experiences of the world that appear to provide a stream of confirmatory events. From the believer's perspective, his or her faith is amply vindicated by the ensuing data he or she encounters. But this is, very often, not a matter of acquiring evidence to which no one bereft of faith has access but, rather, the result of antecedent belief providing a congenial rationale or explanation (what is sometimes called, rebarbatively, an "interpretation") for data that anyone might access, but which the unwashed will "see differently." The believer sees the face of Jesus in the pattern on a rusted window screen; the unbeliever sees the creative workings of an over-eager imagination.¹⁵ That is a rather trivial (but actual) example of the sort of thing I have in mind; but, of course, there are far more complex and sophisticated examples to be had.

The Relevance of Religious Experience

Now here I have been speaking of the attribution of spiritual or theological significance to aspects of experience that are open to public inspection. The Jamesian might counter with an appeal to private experiences—experiences with profound personal significance that the religious often undergo and that allegedly are available predominantly to the already-convinced. The paradigm here is presumably what we call mystical experiences. (That is, episodes in which the believer perceives him or herself to be "possessed" or "inhabited" by, or "united with" God or some other supernatural being; or to have some sort of private sensory or non-sensory experience of being in the presence of, or confronted by, such a being.) Such experiences are often accompanied by perceived communications from the

¹⁵ Since no one knows what Jesus actually looked like, it is a fairly sure bet that the rust pattern, if it resembles a face at all, is reminiscent of the enviroing culture's stereotyped portrayals of the man.

realm of the spirits. Do these experiences convey knowledge from which the unfaithful are excluded (except by way of testimony)?

There is ample reason for denying that any such conclusion can be established. The most obvious difficulty appears in the form of a “many-contenders” objection. Mystical experiences (of the dramatic kind I am considering) are not very common, but their distribution is world-wide, can be found in practically every known cultural setting, and they even appear among non-religious people (though in the latter case, often not appraised as religious in content or affect). A rough estimate places their frequency as occurring at some point in the lives of perhaps two or three percent of the general population. The many-contenders objection is prompted by the observation that the content of such experiences is heavily conditioned by the religious background and/or persuasion of the individual in whom they occur. Were all religions in accord, more or less, on spiritual matters, the difficulty would not appear. But they are not. Not only do religionists not speak with one voice *within* a given religious tradition (e.g. the Jewish and Christian prophets of the Bible are far from unanimous in their views on various matters), but they do not speak with one voice across disparate religions, especially those with a history of conflict or competition. It follows that not everyone’s religiously inspired experiences and revelations can be reliable reflections of the will and communications of a single truthful spiritual source. That directly prompts a couple of questions. First, what is the best explanation of what causes such experiences? And second, in what ways and at what stage of the recipients’ religious engagement is revelatory content recognized and articulated?

The Phenomenology of Mystical Experiences

Take the second question first. There has been debate over whether the experienced raw phenomenal content of a mystical experience *per se* conveys the understood information, or whether that content is derived from the phenomena by acts of “interpretation” from the mystic.¹⁶ The mystic, suppose, has a vision of an old man with horns, gesturing oddly. He “recognizes” the old man as Moses, and he understands the gestures to convey

¹⁶ I place “interpretation” in scare quotes because defenders of this view often consider the relevant cognitive contributions of the mystic to occur unconsciously or pre-consciously. For a sense of the discussion, see the opposing views in Stephen T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and R. K. C. Foreman, *Mysticism, Mind, and Consciousness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999).

a warning of an imminent time of judgment.¹⁷ It is not easy to say to what extent such a person's conception of what he has experienced is arrived at by way of the "raw data," and to what extent it comes from his background beliefs and religious convictions. It does seem to be universally true—in cases that have been well documented—that a visionary does not have experiences whose understood content shows no carry-over from traditions that have played an influential role in the mystic's thinking. As one might expect, people who are ignorant of Christianity, or uninfluenced by it, do not have visions of the Virgin Mary—or of someone they take to be the Virgin. Individuals whose conceptual world is not shaped by the Abrahamic traditions do not have visions of Moses or of someone they so identify.

But for us, the epistemically important point is, whether the information that appears to come from "on high" is integral to the phenomenal data of a prophet or is constructed from those data, the end results are what must face the tribunal of the many-contenders objection. If that objection is well-founded—and the history of communications between humankind and a supernatural realm certainly provide ample support for it—then the credentials of such revelations are under significant challenge.

Explanation and Validation of Mystical Experiences

Religious Experience: Sorting Wheat from Chaff

What might be said in reply on behalf of any particular revelatory tradition? The most obvious response would be to seek (and find) one such tradition that has to its credit a significantly stronger record of independent support for correctness than any of its competitors, and even than their disjunction. But this is a tall order. It is not easy to find such independent evidence, obtained by using tradition-neutral evidentiary criteria for *any* such tradition. Many tests that have been proposed are quite clearly question-begging—for example, appeal to conformity with some canonically inspired text or creed not itself independently well evidenced (such as much of the Bible), or to some special method of prayer whose reliability as a medium of access to the divine is supported only by the theological commitments of the

¹⁷ There are Christian traditions stemming from Jerome's translation of the Vulgate in the fourth century, and probably informed by Jewish traditions that reach back considerably further, according to which Moses was given horns by God. See James Tabor, "What About a Moses with 'Horns'—Was It More Than a Mistranslation?," *Taborblog: Biblical Expositions*, April 5, 2018, jamestabor.com/what-about-a-moses-with-horns-was-it-more-than-a-mistranslation/.

very tradition in question, or to such “signs” as the moral reformation of the mystic, which admits of purely naturalistic explanation, and so forth.

What we are left with, evidently, is that old appeal to miracle reports, whose frailty has already been discussed (and which is itself vulnerable to a many-contenders objection: your miracles vs. mine). But the main point here is that a successful defense of the bona fides of mystical inspiration must fall back upon types of evidence that are susceptible to appraisal using naturalistic methods of empirical investigation. In the end, then, faith appears to drop out as an epistemic method, whatever causal role it might play in preparing someone psychologically to become attuned to having mystical experiences.

Prescience

In this connection, one common type of miracle deserves special attention—that of successful prophecy. In this context, I shall mean by “prophecy” not the general declarations of one who transmits divine wisdom, but specifically the foretelling of future events—that is, prophecy in its narrow sense. A distinctive feature of prophecy, if successful, is that the foretold event(s) need not themselves deviate in any way from natural, even ordinary, occurrences. What is miraculous is that someone should be able to foresee their occurrence. What that requires, roughly, is that the fulfillment of the prophecy be antecedently highly unlikely. A bit more precisely, what that means is that the prior probability—the likelihood that the described events will occur, relative to what is known already before the prophecy is uttered, be very small. To make this still more precise, we must require that a prophecy fulfill the following seven conditions (many of which are obvious or trivial):

- 1) *The prophecy must be known to have been made before the prophesized events.* This condition seems trivial, but it is violated enough times in the biblical canon to have merited a special term. Such a prophecy is a *Vaticinium ex eventu*.
- 2) *The foretold events must not be described ambiguously, vaguely, or with obscure figures and must be described in considerable identifying detail.* The point of this condition is also obvious; the narrower the scope for fulfilling an event, the less room there is for dispute over whether a given event qualifies, is a near-miss, or does not count at all. Violating this condition, we may call the *Nostradamus fallacy*.
- 3) *The occurrence of an alleged fulfillment must be public and sufficiently well-documented to leave little room for doubt whether it occurred.*

- 4) *Events satisfying the description must be unusual or rare—for instance, not “the sun will rise tomorrow” or “there will be wars and rumors of wars.”* Satisfaction of this condition lowers the antecedent probability of happening by chance.
- 5) *They must not be such as could be described by normal human cognitive powers.* A full solar eclipse, though rare, would not qualify.
- 6) *They must not be self-fulfilling, or such that the prophet or his or her followers could ensure that they come about.* Obviously.
- 7) *The prophecy must not be cherry-picked from a long string of prophecies with a poor fulfillment track-record.* Violations commit the *Jean Dixon fallacy*, in honor of the notorious astrologer.

The point of these criteria is to select only prophecy-fulfillments that will provide good reason to suppose that some prescient super-human agent is ultimately the source of the prophetic powers on display. Put simply, passing these tests provides significant weight in favor of supernatural guidance as the best explanation for prophetic accuracy. It is fair, then, to claim authenticity for a prophetic tradition that satisfies these criteria. I have gone into such detail for the case of prophecy to make two points. The first is that, as we have already observed, the epistemic status of a faith-tradition is here, again, evaluated by appeal to normal empirical data, gathered by normal means of investigation. Second, in view of the strong apologetic appeal to prophetic fulfillment in some traditions, notably in Judaism and Christianity, it is worth considering whether there are any prophecies at all within the canon of those traditions that pass the seven-pronged test above. On that score, I offer the hypothesis, for which I know of no falsifying instance, that there are no prophecies announced in any of the canonized versions of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that satisfy all seven of the conditions listed.

Reformed Epistemology

But there is yet a way to elude the many-contenders objection, one that goes to the heart of intuitions about knowledge and justification. That way relies upon a distinction that looms large in contemporary epistemology—that between internalist and externalist accounts of knowledge and justified belief. Roughly, the externalist maintains that the aim of justification (and knowledge) is true belief, and so-called reliabilist externalism holds that belief-forming processes that insure truth, or the likelihood of truth, are knowledge-generating, provided they meet certain further conditions. What those

conditions are varies among reliabilist epistemologies, but what they share is the essential idea that it suffices that a belief-forming process is reliable in generating true beliefs, under the proper conditions, even in the absence of any knowledge or understanding by the cognizing subject of what those processes are, or what makes them reliable.

Internalist epistemologists, by contrast, insist that a belief acquired by processes of which one is unaware, or whose trustworthiness cannot be shown by a believer to meet an appropriately high standard, cannot be considered, *from the cognizer's perspective*, to qualify as knowledge or justified belief. What is essential, by internalist lights, is that the subject herself be aware of, *en rapport* with (have knowledge of) the conditions or considerations in virtue of which truth is guaranteed or made likely. The view that knowledge and justification require relevant certification to which the subject has access is closely linked to the K/K and J/J theses. The former is the principle that you only know that *p* if you know that you know that *p*; the latter that you are justified in believing *p* only if you are justified in believing that you are justified in believing that *p*. These two principles commonly face the objection that they lead to vicious infinite regresses, though I will not here discuss the validity of the criticism.¹⁸

The dialectical advantage of externalism in fending off radical skepticism is obvious: it relieves the cognizing subject of full responsibility for understanding all the factors that contribute to insuring that her beliefs are true, or likely to be true. So, for example, if the skeptic challenges the capability of sense perception to provide knowledge of the “external” world (that is, realities that exist independently of the subject’s inner, conscious states), the externalist retorts that our inability to guarantee the reliability of sense experience as a source of information in a non-question-begging way is neither here nor there—so long as the sensory mechanisms in question do provide us (on the whole) with accurate representations of our environment. Reality, as it were, takes care of business for us, with respect to ensuring the soundness of certain processes of which we are ignorant that play essential roles in the faithful conveyance of information to our minds.

A particular form of such reliabilism has come to be favored by a significant number of Christian philosophers of religion, in significant measure because of its articulation by Alvin Plantinga. The view has been dubbed Reformed Epistemology, in honor of its alleged anticipation by French Reformer, John Calvin. The view deserves consideration here, both because of its popularity and because it makes appeal to a particular conception of the

¹⁸ Though, as a classical—that is internalist—foundationalist, I believe that it is not a valid criticism.

role of faith in the acquisition of religious knowledge. Reformed Epistemology propounds a reliabilist form of externalism. It takes human beings to be designed by God with certain cognitive capacities that will deliver certain knowledge, provided they are operating properly in an environment they were designed to operate in. They will do so by reliably delivering up as beliefs in a human being propositions that are true. These cognitive mechanisms include human reasoning abilities and our array of sensory modalities.

But most importantly for our purposes, they include religious convictions—beliefs (in the Christian’s case) such as what Plantinga calls the great truths of the Gospels about God and salvation. Moreover, these beliefs are typically arrived at in a way that makes them properly basic. A basic belief is one that may serve as part of the justification, or foundation, for other (non-basic) beliefs, but which is itself not founded upon other beliefs. On this picture, the basic beliefs serve as the foundation of all the rest of our beliefs. A belief is *properly* basic when it is basic—not held because it is justified by other beliefs—and is a belief that does not *require* such justification to qualify as knowledge. Such beliefs include ones that are *self-evident* (such as simple truths of logic) or “evident to the senses.” But by Plantinga’s lights, they extend further—in particular, they can include many religious beliefs, provided these have been arrived at and maintained in a “proper” way—that is, by reliable belief-forming mechanisms that meet certain specifications that do not include inference from other propositions.¹⁹ As a Christian, Plantinga believes that many Christian articles of faith can be arrived at, by the grace of God, in such a way. Specifically (following Calvin), he maintains that there are two mechanisms that afford access to such truths for believing Christians. The first is a kind of intuition, the *sensus divinitatus*, with which the deity has imbued all humans that generates intimations of the existence and lordship of God.

The second mechanism is the operation of what Plantinga calls the instigations of the Holy Spirit, which contribute to knowledge of the fundamental articles of Christian belief. Such instigations, which on suitable occasions afford the faithful properly basic beliefs on creedal matters, are available to those who make a certain kind of commitment to God, one that involves an invitation to the Holy Spirit and a will to be guided by it.²⁰ So, for the Reformed Epistemologist, faith is a matter of believing certain

¹⁹ See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 3–47.

²⁰ For Dutch Reformed Christians, it is a delicate question whether the unsaved individual can freely choose to perform this act of invitation, or whether doing so requires a change of mind that can result only from the action of God’s grace.

propositions, and such beliefs qualify as knowledge if they are properly generated by the actions of the *sensus divinitatus* and the Holy Spirit, or are inferred from those. One might call them, in the Reformed account, the mechanisms of faith, and they play a role, *inter alia*, in providing a Christian with the sorts of propositional attitudes—conviction, certitude or confidence, and the like—necessary to having knowledge of a proposition.

Might we not say, then, that on a Reformed conception, faith is indeed a crucial component of that complex relation between a subject and a proposition in virtue of which the former knows the latter, at least when that proposition is an article of (religious) faith? Or, if this is not the same thing, that faith, as a capacity to respond to certain propositions with a repertoire of attitudes essential to knowledge, serves an instrumental role, just as our senses do, in providing access to a certain range of facts? That seems to be correct; that is, it is correct if the Reformed account of knowledge is correct. But one might hesitate to accept that account.

One ground for doubt is another form of the many-contenders objection, widely and affectionately known as the Great Pumpkin objection (in honor of Linus' object of worship in the Peanuts comic strip). Why cannot the Reform position be equally mustered, *mutatis mutandis*, in the service of *any* faith tradition? The response is that, dialectically, it can—but that only one such version (putatively the Christian one) will make claims (about God, a Holy Spirit, a *sensus divinitatus*, and other claims about faith, salvation, etc.) that are, in fact, *true*—and it is only because of these claims that Christian faith is knowledge-conferring (even for those Christians who do not know the Reformed view of the mechanisms in play). Of course, the Linus-minded can make parallel claims about the Great Pumpkin; but by Christian lights, they have things wrong, and so are not in the know. Here, I will abstain from pursuing that debate further but, instead, make other remarks.

First, as an externalist epistemology, the Reformed view does not require that we, or anyone, actually know the claimed facts about the Spirit and *sensus* to be true, in order to be their epistemic beneficiaries. But even if we grant this, we would naturally want to know what evidence is to be had concerning whether the Reformed story about the generation of knowledge by the mechanisms of faith is true (and similarly for the competing Reformed epistemologies proposed on behalf of rival faiths). That seems a fair question; and the answer will have to be supported by empirical evidence, not by appeal to beliefs whose epistemic status presupposes a positive answer to the question. One cannot say (and not beg the question), for example, that one's beliefs that

the Spirit and the *sensus* exist are vouchsafed by those very things and are, therefore, properly basic.²¹

A second difficulty is that another central claim of Reformed Epistemology is—or so I believe—false. Plantinga tells us more about how the “instigations” of the Holy Spirit work to bring about properly basic beliefs in God and in the various fundamental creedal commitments of the Christian faith.²² There are, Plantinga testifies, any number of fairly ordinary occasions that may serve to “trigger” such beliefs. A sudden, overwhelming conviction of God’s existence, and feeling of his presence, love, providence, and so on, may be triggered by the sight of a beautiful sunset, or of a mountain vista or the stars on a clear night. A belief that Jesus died for one’s sins on the cross and was resurrected might be triggered by hearing or reading the Passion narrative in one of the Gospels. Plantinga *denies* that such stories in the Bible can provide good (empirical) *evidence* for what they relate; rather, they serve as triggers—that is, prompting causes—of the generation of such beliefs through the mediating activity of the Holy Spirit. The creedal beliefs that emerge are, therefore, not inferred from anything but are (properly) basic.

There are good reasons to doubt the correctness of this account. Superficially, it seems plausible: people do have religious awakenings that are occasioned by such experiences as a beautiful sunset, or sonata, or reading inspiring passages from the Bible or the Qur’an, and seem, otherwise, to “come from nowhere.” Do they really come from nowhere—or from the subtle workings of the Holy Spirit upon the mind? The straight inference (if that is what it is) to an eaves-dropping Spirit ignores an alternative explanation that is both naturalistic and supported by abundant evidence.

Our ordinary rational belief-forming processes are both more complex and subtler than the usual reconstructions in terms of principles of deductive and inductive reasoning suggest. Antecedent beliefs often guide our curiosity in certain directions and, of course, influence what explanations we will regard as plausible for the data we encounter. But even more pertinent here is the illusion that we systematically collect and retain a body of data, and then form inferences, perhaps via the straight rule of induction, or Bayesian up-dating, or reasoning to the best explanation, that make reference to the total data that experience has afforded us.

²¹ Calvin believed that all humans possess a *sensus divinitatus* and, therefore, an inherent inclination to believe in God. But empirical data—and, surely, in particular, the number of cultures worldwide that believe in many divinities or none—militate against that claim.

²² Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 241–89, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195131932.001.0001>.

This is not, except in certain special contexts (like scientific research labs) how knowledge-acquisition works. In particular, it is not regularly the case that we retain in memory a systematic record of all the relevant observations we could in principle muster. (And this is a good thing: it would severely over-tax all but the most capacious and encyclopedic of human memories.) We all know, in the ordinary sense, that dandelions are aggressive invaders of lawns and gardens in their natural range. But we do not form or maintain that belief by retaining a growing record of particular dandelions we have observed to grow in such locations. Rather, we recall that we have seen “lots of them,” that they are hard to eradicate, and that they are quite promiscuous in finding locations to propagate. Such beliefs are strengthened, especially during early encounters with the plant, by continued observation, not by way of a retained record. Indeed, much of the time our beliefs are generated or modified by “noticings” of our environment that involve no focused attention at all to the features that might come later to be of interest to us. We typically know, for instance, whether the lights are on or not in a room we are occupying, without so much as giving the matter any thought.

These observations about our ordinary cognitive processes are relevant to assessing the account of religious belief-formation in fairly straightforward ways. The history of the accumulating cognitive processes that lies behind a (perhaps rather sudden) “coming to see” that the words of Jesus in the Bible must be true will almost always span a considerable period of time and involve countless experiences and inferences that serve to support the conviction about the veracity of the words of the canonical Jesus. And these can bear upon the conclusion concerning Jesus in countless ways, both direct and very indirect, both conscious at some point or never properly so.

Conclusions

My conclusions, then, can be stated in short order:

- 1) That there is a multitude of conceptions of what faith is and what role it plays in the religious life of an individual;
- 2) That the claim that religious faith constitutes or provides an avenue to knowledge or justification for particular religious doctrines or to the will of a divine being, or anything of that sort, falls short for each of the conceptions of faith I have surveyed;
- 3) And last, that precisely because the cognitive background and reconstruction (rational, psychological, social, and otherwise) of

purported religious insights is so complex and difficult to excavate, we must all remain circumspect in our accounts of what such processes entail in any given case, and to what extent they yield beliefs that have good epistemic credentials. If so much lies behind a glass, seen darkly by the subject, then how much more so for other observers?

Even one's coming to believe that dandelions are aggressive derives, in significant part, from long-forgotten inferences to such general bits of acquired wisdom as that members of the same biological species will rather strongly resemble one another, and that the success of a species depends upon its adaptability to a range of environments. How much more complex will be the cognitive inputs that provoke, for example, a major shift of paradigms in a scientific field—and, *mutatis mutandis*, in theological convictions? Because so much of the cognitive development that leads to such an event lies behind the veil of complexity and forgotten inferences in a nearly unrecoverable cognitive history, the present cognitive leap may seem to arrive almost “out of the blue,” without a robust evidential rationale. But that may be an illusion that results from an inability to reconstruct the long chain of reasonings that led to the new belief. For this reason, I do not find Plantinga's account in terms of actions of a *sensus* and a Spirit to be at all convincing. If not, then what remains of Reformed Epistemology?²³

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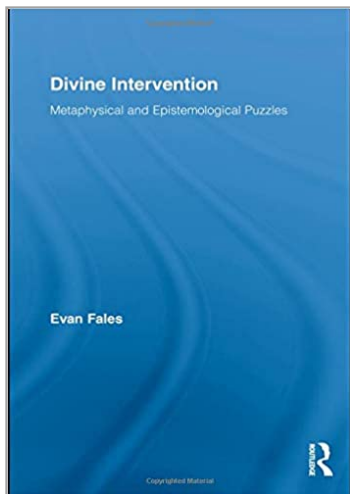
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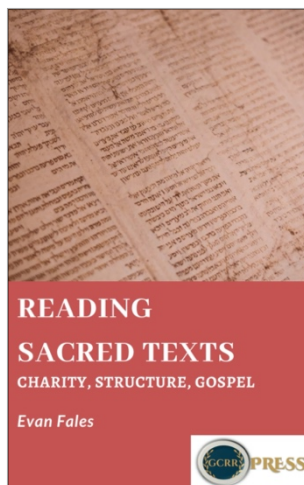
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